REMEMBER
Communion Meditation
John 6:4-15
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It is no accident that one of the most effective television commercials over the past decade uses the jingle "nothin' says lovin' like something from the oven" and combines the idea of bread with people who are loved. The Pillsbury commercials identify their product with pleasant memories of home, security, safety and affection. Bread is a very powerful symbol. Manna - bread of the wilderness; the bread of home and family and love; and the bread of the Last Supper.

During the blitz in the early days of World War II, the English arranged to have many children removed from their London homes and placed with families in the countryside, safe from the terror of the nightly bombing raids. It was an admirable idea but it soon became apparent that for many of the children the terror of the city was not as bad as separation from parents. The story is that a social worker was observing and recording this dynamic and the objects the youngsters used to remind themselves of home - "dolls, pencils, rocks, shells, pictures. One little girl, however, kept an entirely different object. This child slept each night with a piece of bread left from dinner clutched in her hand. The bread contained a memory, a reminder of security and home and meals eaten with mother and father. It was a sign of a relationship that continued even while they were apart; and it was a beloved promise of a day in the future, a day of reunion and peace and overwhelming joy. It was for her, that is, truly sacramental bread." (Bread and Wine, Lawton Posey, The Christian Ministry, 3/80, p.31).

"The Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you: do this remembering me.'" There are no more precious words in our vocabulary. For all Christians they are part of our dearest rite, the Sacrament of Communion.

"Do this in remembrance..." We remember the occasion at which He said those words: the Last Supper, or at least that's what I remember. But His friends, the ones who sat around the table; what do you think they remembered?

Perhaps they thought about a day none of them could forget. They had been traveling through Galilee, walking from village to village, stopping every time a crowd or small group gathered, stopping sometimes to talk with individuals or to watch in awe as Jesus healed the sick. Word had spread like wild fire: the crowds grew in size, people were coming from all over Galilee and it wasn't long before He was surrounded by people wherever He went: sick people, old people, poor, crippled, sad people. Some had begun to push and clamor, demanding His attention, pulling at His garments. There wasn't time or opportunity to eat a meal together or to sit and talk.

They convinced Him to climb in a small fishing vessel and sail across the Sea of Galilee. It was hot as only a burning sun on the ocean can be: nobody broke the silence; each hoping that the other shore would provide a place for a quiet meal and rest. But from a long distance, in the midday sun, they could see them gathering again. Somehow the news had preceded them. The crowd was waiting.

It was late in the afternoon when they climbed out into shallow water and waded ashore. The insistent pleas began immediately: "Heal me, Jesus! Make me whole, Master." As they walked up onto a hill the crowd followed, seeming to grow larger by the minute. If memory served correctly it was Philip He had asked about money. It was poor Philip who had to tell Him they didn't have nearly enough money in the meagre traveling treasury for the crowd. Andrew stepped forward then, in a totally offhand manner, trying to break the tired desperation of the situation with a little outlandish humor. He pointed to a little boy, a boy who had been following closely and said,

"There you are - that fellow's bound to have some bread. Here boy - let's see what you've got."

What happened next never was very clear to them. The young boy reached in his shoulder satchel and handed Jesus his five small loaves and two pickled fish. They remembered that Jesus told the crowd to sit down, right where they were, and that He broke one of the loaves, lifted His eyes toward heaven and in a loud voice intoned that same prayer His people had been praying for centuries: "Blessed art thou, O lord, our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth." They remembered Him passing the bread to them and each of them breaking off a chunk. There was a great mystery about what had happened next. By unspoken consent they had never discussed it. But each remembered how, when they were finished with their bread, they looked up and the crowd was eating; those thousands of people were passing bread to one another and they were all eating together, just like a big family at dinner.

Each had wondered about that day: perhaps the gesture of the little boy was so right and timely that every person there was inspired to take out his lunch and share it. Perhaps someone had brought a lot of bread along and shared it. And perhaps, somehow, in a way they couldn't begin to comprehend, that bread had become enough bread.

They didn't discuss that possibility. Things like that didn't happen. And yet - all those people, and their own hunger after a day on the water, and the good taste of salty fish and chewy bread, and everybody sitting down and Jesus talking until the sun faded and the air grew chilly and the breeze came up and the people drifted away.

"This is my body which is for you. Do this remembering me." That strange day is what they may have remembered when they broke bread together.

Modern Christians ask, first, about this story: "Did it happen and how?" That is the wrong question, albeit our favorite. The New Testament doesn't say how. As a matter of fact, the author doesn't even say that Jesus multiplied the bread and fish; simply that the people were hungry and that there was enough to eat. The New Testament works very hard to avoid making its testimony about Him dependent on His ability to perform miracles. But the effort is lost on us mostly. It's almost as if we could dismiss Him and relax about the whole business if someone could prove conclusively that He never walked on water or fed five thousand people.

The only appropriate question is what does it mean? What does it say to me about God and the world and my life?

May I suggest that it says, very simply but profoundly that God cares about physical things - like hunger? Jesus himself would have been confused by the way we divide spiritual matters from physical concerns. That idea is Greek - there is some of it in the New Testament as a result of using the Greek language, but Jesus never heard of it. He didn't differentiate between spiritual and physical needs. He simply reached out in love and helped people wherever they needed helping: by healing, feeding, forgiving, or simply listening.

Helmut Thielicke wrote somewhere that even a Beethoven Symphony doesn't sound very good if you're shivering. And the Epistle of James asks simply, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James, 2:15-16).

What Jesus wanted His friends to remember was that God could be counted on to deal with the wholeness of their humanity. He cares about us in our wholeness, not just the parts we label religious. Jesus Christ came to redeem us and make us new; our time, our values, our relationships, but also our physical needs. That's first.

The second meaning of this story is that Jesus Christ offers us something as necessary and fundamental to our existence as our daily bread. Now we don't always believe that. We act sometimes as if this religion business is entirely peripheral, a leisure time activity, with little if anything to do with the rest of life.

How curious that the social sciences are telling religious types to take themselves a little more seriously. Psychology knows how desperately we need to be loved and accepted for who we are; and how, when we are deprived of grace in some redeeming form, life can become a frustrating, maddening hell of grabbing, striving and grasping for it. Psychology knows how many of us drive ourselves twelve, fourteen hours a day, to prove our worth; that nothing is too precious to be offered up on the altar of self-esteem; that we will sacrifice our marriages, our families, even our health, to document, if only to ourselves, that we amount to something. That's how deep this hunger is.

Just as He fed the hungry that day long ago, so Jesus Christ offers to meet your deepest need today. The Good News which He announced, taught, demonstrated and incarnated in His own life is just this: we are loved, loved by God: as we are; sometimes in spite of what we have become. What Jesus Christ offers is God's love and the joyful freedom of His grace.

That is food we need more than any other. It is bread and meat and wine.

"This is my body broken for you. Do this remembering me," He said.

So remember Him this day - in bread broken at a friendly lunch, or in your aloneness as you eat in solitude, or in the shouts and banter and interruptions of your children at dinner, or here - at His own table, in bread broken and a cup shared. Remember Him as your needs are met - this Lord who loves you, and cares about you and feeds your hunger.

Amen.

God our Father, be present in the breaking of bread - this bread, but also all the bread, all the relationships, all the hunger and need we experience. In these blessed days of Lent, draw us close - in Jesus Christ.

Amen.